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ABSTRACT

Participation by agencies in a network can provide access to a wider range of services and resources for the handicapped and can enable additional agencies to take advantage of information regarding specialized resources and services to the benefit of unlimited others. The major obstacle to effective networking is the fear that participation in a formal network will erode an agency's control over its own data. A successful network involves careful planning, understanding financial requirements, establishing effective interagency cooperation and communication, and utilizing computer technology as a networking tool. The most important purposes of networking are communication and cooperation, establishment and delivery of service, and creation of a comprehensive quality data base. (SBH)

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Enhancing Services to the Handicapped Through Networking

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Enhancing Services to the Handicapped

Through Networking

Intensified efforts to serve the severely disabled and the national movement to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill and handicapped individual have led to greater concern regarding delivery of services to the handicapped.

Over the years, many states' delivery of services to the handicapped has been segmented, with numerous agencies producing a variety of services as part of their responsibilities. This pattern of delivery grew and came to be accepted as a natural course of development as state and federal funding levels grew with increased state needs. In the last decade, however, federal regulations, which require greater financial outlays, have begun to supercede federal and state resources for compliance. The federal regulatory trend is only beginning and states are facing increasing financial requirements in the face of decreasing state resources. The problems of overlapping and duplication of services, shortages of state dollars, lack of federal financial support to implement regulations, and diversification of responsibilities over many agencies are forcing states to reexamine their patterns of delivery of services.

These problems are not unique to one state. Such problems are an outgrowth of national economic circumstances and clearly are a part of conditions affecting the delivery of services to the handicapped. It is necessary to seek a solution in which client needs will continue to be served and that at the same time be economically efficient. Networking is one solution to the problem. Networking is a cooperative relationship among information and service providers who collectively can deliver better

services than could be provided by the same set of information and service providers operating as isolated, single entities. Networks are nonhierarchical, although various segments often serve the total network more than do others. Some segments are larger and have more resources than do others. Such size and resource differences do not imply or lead to dominance in the ideal information network, since the information provided by all segments is viewed as equally important to the total network (Roth, 1977). Quality information networks are always open to new segments and new types of linkages. As an example, the Governor's Office and Auburn University's Department of Educational Leadership are developing a networking model to improve services for the handicapped in Alabama. The Facilities and Information Network Development (FIND) project has been established at the state level as a coordinating unit responsible for information network development, organization and dissemination of data for the handicapped in Alabama. The goal of this information network is to provide every handicapped person in Alabama access to that part of the total information network which will satisfy the individual's needs and interests, regardless of the individual's location, social or physical condition, or level of intellectual achievement.

For effective networking to become a reality, handicapped citizens must have access to total information resources and services. This will happen only when agencies are committed to full participation in a network. Participation by agencies in a network can provide access to a wider range of services and resources for the handicapped; additionally, it can enable additional agencies to take advantage of information regarding specialized resources and services to the benefit of unlimited others.

The strength of an information network depends primarily on the services each agency provides and is willing to make available to other participants. An information and referral agency in a rural area may not be aware of services available to it through a volunteer agency located in an urban area. Information networks can provide such information.

Benefits accruing from an agency's participation in a network can improve the quality and quantity of information available to the handicapped. Networking expands the range of resources to which the handicapped can have access and puts them in contact with these resources. Information that is within reach is information that will be used.

An information network of agencies that serves the disabled, because it is also a network of people, provides a social environment where mutual understanding stimulates peer acceptance and professional aspirations. Despite the advantages of networking among agencies that serve the handicapped and other information agencies, participation in formal networks is not common. Although most information providers share some information, there is a need for a comprehensive, widely disseminated model for the entire field. Networking arrangements among agencies should be formalized. While informal arrangements have been successful, the success is often short-range and limited. For example, a change in personnel could quickly alter a previous arrangement. Usually informal arrangements exist strictly at a local level, with no mechanism for sharing information statewide, regionally, or nationally.

Protecting the Turf

The major obstacle to successful networking often seems to lie in the attitudes of agency personnel. A willingness to share, to modify policies,

and to communicate and plan with other agencies is crucial to the establishment and growth of an effective network. When this willingness is not present, a network cannot be initiated, much less generate and disseminate quality information. Thus, problems in developing a network must be recognized and addressed in an objective and professional manner.

One of the major barriers to the development of successful information networks is a people problem. The fear that participation in a formal network will erode an agency's control over its own data is common. This fear is not unexpected, since the fundamental premise on which effective networks is built is a willingness to share information, resources and services beyond primary users without a strong regard for jurisdictional boundaries. For a network to be successful, there must be wide acceptance of the principle that all agency users have a right of access to materials and services without regard to where they are developed.

Personnel overload often inhibits participation in networking. Time and effort are needed, especially in the planning stages to construct a successful system for interagency cooperation. Few information managers and specialists are eager to assume new responsibilities if they believe there is not sufficient time to meet existing demands. Only the conviction that membership in a network can provide a better means of delivering important services can move information managers to consider participation. The total concept centers around the premise of "give and take." Considering the traditional pattern of protecting the turf, the decision to participate in a formal networking system is not an easy one. Because of state or regional commitment, it is not realistic to expect one to easily overcome such barriers. Beliefs and attitudes change slowly or not at all. Networking

sometimes means participants have to recognize other agencies' areas of expertise and change their priorities to accommodate them. For example, local information and referral agencies communicate much more effectively within their communities than do state-level agencies. There is no simple solution to the "turf protection" problem, but is the responsibility of the network coordinating unit to recognize and deal with it. Those persons responsible for developing a network can point out that a network will not reduce an agency's status, but instead, will enhance it as more users become aware of the agency.

Planning: A Critical Tool

Planning alone cannot make a network successful. Planning can, however, focus action on purposes and forecast which actions will facilitate the accomplishment of established networking objectives. The long-range success of an information network lies in the strategy of realistic planning. In essence, planning directs one's thinking toward what is expected to be done, why it will be done, where it will be done and who is going to participate.

Although there are many planning models the following are logical steps that any coordinating unit can follow to assure that its networking plan is solidly based:

1. Develop a general goal for the network.
2. Determine what is available--money, agencies, institutions, personnel, data, computer hardware, telecommunications.
3. Formulate goals into more specific objectives for the network.
4. Develop a plan of action based on objectives and resources.
5. Evaluate the plan to determine if objectives are being reached.

Careful planning by a well-defined group of network participants is needed to generate effective interagency commitment and cooperation in an information network.

Effective planners need information on successful information network models developed for the handicapped. Such models are needed for those seeking direction at the exploratory stages of networking. Planning guides for developing information networks for the handicapped that involve service and information agencies are available. It has been difficult to find consultants who are experienced in this area. One of the few resources which is available for planners is the Clearinghouse on the Handicapped (HEW), Office for Handicapped Individuals, Washington, D. C.

Another obstacle that affects good planning is the wide geographic separation of agencies. However, since one of the basic principles of network development is that those involved in implementing the network should be involved in the planning and decision-making process, it is vital that each agency make arrangements for participation.

Agencies must have realistic knowledge of coordinating responsibilities, costs for transmitting information, disseminating materials, maintaining a clearinghouse and sharing computer time. Additionally, network members must recognize that networking embraces all types of resources, including human resources, support systems and necessary technology. All of these factors should be addressed and clarified during the planning stage.

In effect, a successful planning process refers to the construction of an operating network--comprehensive enough to cover all phases of operation and detailed enough that specific attention may be given to its fulfillment in controllable links. Therefore, the planning process is not only a critical

tool for network development, but it also must be conducted with the active participation of each potential networking member.

Financial Considerations

Although networking is cost-effective, it is not free. Decision makers must know the true costs as well as the projected benefits in order to make realistic decisions about their participation in a network. Networking can be cost-effective without actually reducing the total cost of a program. No single information program or agency can provide resources comprehensive enough to completely meet the wide ranging information needs of diverse clientele.

Materials, communications and equipment do not represent the only costs in resource sharing or participation in providing information for the disabled. Participating links must be ready to allocate staff time to provide services to both primary and secondary clientele.

Stable financial support must be available at two different levels if information networks are to be successful. First, each agency must meet the daily needs of its users. Additionally, supplemental resources must be provided to finance the costs of network operations and services. All types of information agencies experience difficulties in securing adequate financial support for basic services.

Federal funding is one source to consider for supplemental support of networking expenses, but federal funding is difficult to secure and cannot be considered a stable income source. To rely on federal funding for survival is to invite financial instability. The only secure monies which come from federal funding are resources allocated to the state by formula.

Not all networking services increase costs to the participating agency. Actual cost reduction can occur. Joint planning and implementation of staff development sessions usually add no additional costs. Cooperative purchasing and data collection and development often add no additional costs to operation, and can produce substantial reductions. The costs of network services are offset by savings in other areas. For example, computerized data bases can be readily searched by remote terminal linked by telephone lines at a relatively low cost. By using this system, participating agencies can acquire needed information quickly, and the cost of an exhaustive collection of indexes and directories becomes unnecessary.

Thus, the problems of overlapping and duplication of services, shortage of state dollars, lack of federal financial support for regulations and diversification of responsibilities over many agencies can be defined and addressed economically through the networking process.

Effective Communication: The Basic Principle

Effective interagency cooperation depends heavily on the quality of the communication system that links agency to agency. The process of this linkage is often referred to as a Management Information System (MIS) and is not only vital to the networking concept, but also is the key to successful communication.

A management information system, as shown in Figure 1, can be defined as a communication process in which information (input) is recorded, stored and retrieved (processed) for decisions (output) on planning, operating and controlling (Herbert, 1976).

Insert Figure 1 about here

The internal quality control cycle provides data about the quality of incoming information from the networking suppliers. This cycle determines if information is correct, current and available through continuous, constant updating with the local level users.

The internal and external quality control cycle readily identifies changing information needs of networking receivers and users by accumulating information such as changes in manpower projections, college admission requirements, financial aid, services available and legislation. Because the quality control cycles constantly internalize this information from local, regional, and national levels, the processing and coordinating unit has the capability of constantly updating the information.

The coordination and support of personnel among linking agencies is also vital to an information network. The personnel coordination and support cycle provides data regarding support or resistance of participating personnel. Data bases that seem feasible and appropriate, as determined by information assembled through the other cycles, may fail if sufficient involvement and support from networking personnel are not evident. Effective communication, then, is the premise on which a successful network is built.

Computer Technology: A Networking Tool

The development and utilization of sophisticated networking tools is a key to the progress of a networking information system. Computer technology plays an important role as a tool in implementing information network activities. Many agencies have access to a computer or to a remote terminal. If

the equipment is or can be made compatible with other components of the information system, the disseminating site can coordinate networking services through access to linking data bases. Such data bases include information on occupations, social services, resources, education information, and legislation. Many community service agencies have well-established delivery systems which can interact for an expanded network of information. Some rely on printed form, some on word of mouth, and others hold seminars. Very few maintain information on a computer and even fewer retrieve data directly.

A local agency's unique knowledge of resources at the community level makes it invaluable as a potential contributor to an information network. Local contact and familiarity helps maintain quality control of the data on the system and strengthens the network. Having access to information in other geographic areas via computer--either as data storage and periodic retrieval or through unlimited access--allows agencies to:

1. Maintain more accurate and current data on services in their respective geographic areas.
2. Share information and the cost of collecting and validating that information.
3. Have the ability to sort through and retrieve information based on the client's unique need.
4. Give agencies access to hard-copies or directories of services in their areas.
5. Identify "gaps" in services.

Thus, a computer can facilitate the flow of information through a network. Collecting, loading, validating and delivering never cease. The

system is continuous. Without a computer, the flow of data is possible-- especially through a well-coordinated network. It is slower, however, and has stop-gaps. Computerization not only insures that the information is current and valid, but also lends quality control to the the total communication process.

If participating agencies are to derive full benefits from an information network and provide useful contributions, they must have adequate communication tools. Knowledge of other information available, rapid transmission of information requests and prompt delivery of information can be critical to the handicapped client. A few days' or a week's delay can render the information useless. It is therefore essential that each agency have the ability to identify and retrieve quickly needed resources within the network. It is only through effective networking tools that this capability can be met. When this need is met, an agency is not only demonstrating an effective networking system, but also efficient delivery of services.

Alabama Governor's Office of State Planning and Federal Programs, for example, is making maximum use of available data sources and facilitating reciprocal cooperation among service providers to the handicapped citizens of Alabama through the Facilities and Information Network Development (FIND) project. One of FIND's major activities is the development of a comprehensive, computer-based information system for the handicapped.

The information system initially addresses six data bases: services, occupations, education and training, resources, financial aid and facilities. Examples of these data include service directories developed at the local level for information and retireval, job analysis data developed on-site by

the Department of Labor, and career information provided by the State. Optional dissemination strategies are being investigated for delivery of these data to the handicapped.

These activities focus directly on the networking concept. Through formal commitment and cooperation of the various linking agencies throughout the State, region, and country, the FIND project is successfully achieving its goals cost effectively.

Conclusion

The resources and services provided by agencies throughout the state and country constitute a major component of information which would facilitate a quality national network. The quality of information available to the handicapped is important and directly effects each disabled individual by offering direction through the existing jungle of resources and services. Based on research and contacts with information providers and consumers, networking is a logical approach. The following principles represent a basis for exploring the possibility of information networking for the handicapped.

1. Information networks must be built on agency commitment and quality information data banks. Each participating agency must have the capability of serving its existing users and of contributing to the network.
2. All participating agencies must be represented equitably in the governance structure of the network.
3. Networking is not free. In addition to specific equipment costs, personnel time will be needed to plan the network, to carry out its operations, and to provide the resources and services to be shared. Networking is, however, an economical approach to the

development and delivery of quality information to a wide range of users.

4. Effective communication among participants is a critical tool for success. An effective communication system should link all participating agencies, and each agency's staff must feel comfortable communicating and working with other participating links.

Networking then serves several purposes. The most important purposes, however, are (1) communication and cooperation, (2) establishment and delivery of service, and (3) creation of a comprehensive quality data base.

Of the three purposes, the first has far-reaching effects in cost-effectiveness as well as cooperation. The second strengthens the quality of service to the user. The third provides for integration of the most comprehensive and effective planning data base to date. Any one of these three would warrant the establishment of an information network.

No greater challenge to the national goal of addressing the needs of the handicapped exists than the development and implementation of a practical and economical information network system. To consider less only encourages unnecessary, costly duplication and fragmentation of the delivery of services to the client.

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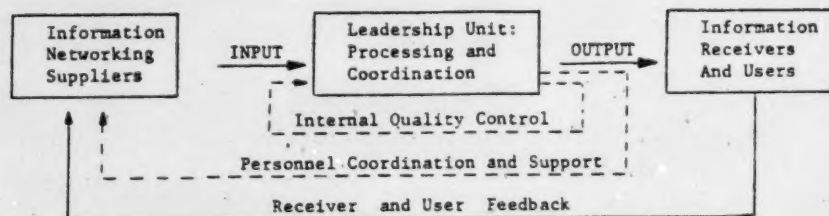


Figure 1